



JASON MOORE 2017-06-15

THE MYTH OF THE 'HUMAN ENTERPRISE': THE ANTHROPOS AND CAPITALOGENIC CHANGE

ECONOFICTION ANTHROPOCENE, CAPITALISM, CAPITALOCENE, MARXISM

Humans *are* distinctive. No one is arguing the point. But *how* do we think through that distinctiveness? How do our conceptualizations lead us to highlight some relations over others, and how do those in/visibilities conform to – and challenge – extant structures of power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Sohn-Rethel 1978)? Those are tough – and politically fraught – questions.

The social sciences emerged not only on the premise of fragmentation and the autonomy of spheres (culture, politics, economy, etc.) but also on the ground of human exceptionalism. Seeing human relations as not only distinct from nature, but as effectively independent of the web of life, has shaped social thought for two centuries. (There is a reason why one reads Durkheim but not Darwin in social theory seminars.) In this, human exceptionalism expresses the peculiar idea that humanity “alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies” (Haraway 2008, 11; also Dunlap and Catton 1979).

The philosophical point is fundamental to the Anthropocene dialogue because, after all, its central concept is the *Anthropos*. In the dominant Anthropocene presentation, the human species becomes a mighty, largely homogenous, acting unit: the “human enterprise” (Steffen, et al., 2011a). (Could a more neoliberal turn of phrase be found?) Inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, and much more – all have been cleansed from “Humanity,” the Anthropocene’s point of departure.

Cleansed of such differences, Humanity appears as a kind of Cartesian virgin birth. Nature appears, in this same imaginary, as “out there,” somehow pristine and untouched. (Thus Humanity and Nature implicate not one, but two, virgin births.) The resulting story of ecological crisis is a kind of Tale of the Fall. Humans do bad things to Nature. Nature becomes a fantasy of the wild, of pristine nature, awaiting our protection, fearing destruction at our hands. In this Tale, the human enterprise now rivals, and presumably is destroying, the “great forces of nature” (Steffen et al. 2011, 2007). Capitalism and its driving relations have indeed directed horrific violence towards human and extra-human life. I would go so far as to say that an unusual combination of productive and necrotic violence defines capitalism. The Capitalocene, as McBrien reminds us, is also a Necrocene – a system that not only accumulates capital, but drives extinction (2016; also Dawson 2016). At stake is how we think through the relations of Capitalocene and Necrocene – between the creativity of capitalist development and its deep exterminism. That exterminism is

not anthropogenic but *capitalogenic*.

Here, then, is an important difference: between an analysis that begins with undifferentiated Humanity and one that sets out from humanity's patterns of difference, conflict, and cooperation. Too often in the Anthropocene narrative, something like the taxonomy of "Anthromes" (Ellis et al. 2010) – ecosystems dominated by humans, and therefore not "wild" – tends to *precede* the interpretation of historical change. Highly linear notions of time and space substituted for the complex task of historical-geographical interpreting. At the same time, Anthropocene scholars cannot escape the conclusion that humans, too, are a "geophysical force" – the singular is important here – that operates *within* nature (Steffen et al. 2011, 741).

This conclusion, recognizing humans as part of nature whilst separating Humanity from Nature, troubles Anthropocene thinking at every turn. On the one hand, humans become Humanity, a singular *human enterprise*. They act upon – or are subject to – the "great forces of nature." On the other hand, Humanity – the uppercase is deliberate – remains a *geophysical force*. This is the "One System/Two Systems" problem faced by environmentally-oriented scholars across the Two Cultures (Moore 2015a). In this view, humans are recognized as one species within the web of life (One System). But the recognition proceeds by abstracting – rather than synthesizing – the biological from human sociality. Established methodological frames, analytical strategies, and narrative structures are scarcely touched. Practically speaking, Society is independent from Nature (Two Systems). For the earth-system scientists behind the Anthropocene, Social Factors – again, decidedly in the uppercase – are added; for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, Nature is added. There are "human constructions" and "natural" constructions (Zalasiewicz et al. 2011: 837). This is Green Arithmetic: Nature plus Society equals the Whole.

Green Thought, Humanity & the Problem Of Dualism

But is this Human/Nature binary the most effective way to distinguish humans in the web of life?

The elevation of the *Anthropos* as a collective actor encourages several important mis-recognitions. One is a neo-Malthusian view of population lurking below the surface of these analyses (e.g. Crutzen 2002; Fischer-Kowalski, et al., 2015; Steffen et al. 2007: 618; Ellis et al., 2013).[1] These are neo-Malthusian not because they emphasize population, but because they make population dynamics independent of capitalism's historical patterns of family formation and population movement (see Secombe 1992, 1995). Secondly, Humanity's agency is realized principally through technology-resource complexes rather than interpenetrated relations of power, technology, and capital (e.g. Steffen, et al. 2007; contrast with Mumford 1934). Thirdly, scarcity tends to be removed from those relations – of power and re/production – and deposited into Nature, abstracted from those relations. And finally, as we have seen, such approaches tend to view humanity (or "human societies" in the abstract) as a responsible for the transgression of planetary thresholds (Steffen et al. 2015b).

Such views evidently rest upon Human/Nature dualism and its cognates. This dualism obscures our vistas of power, production, and profit in the web of life. It prevents us from seeing the accumulation of capital as a powerful web of interspecies dependencies; it prevents us from seeing how those interdependencies are not only shaped by capital, but also shape it; and it prevents us from seeing how the terms of that producer/product relation change over time. For instance, it is clear that capitalogenic climate change is undermining crucial relations of capitalism's Cheap Food regime in the 21st century – Cheap Nature increasingly confronts forms of nature that cannot be controlled by capitalist technology or rationality (Moore, 2015b; Altvater 2016).

Human/Nature dualisms presume what needs to be explained: How we have reached the point where we assume a separation that so clearly does not exist? Such dualisms confuse modernity's historical movements (e.g. alienation) for philosophical abstractions ("separation from nature"). They elide the deep, profound, and intimate porosity and permeability of human sociality, whose forms are specific, uneven, and distinctive. Nature/Society dualisms cannot discern the flows of human and extra-human life as they bond and bundle with each other; they prevent us from asking questions about the connective tissues of human sociality. Green Arithmetic, in other words, offers a Human/Nature binary that can proceed only by converting the living, multi-species connections of humanity-in-nature and the web of life into dead abstractions – abstractions that connect to each other as cascades of consequences rather than constitutive relations.

The Anthropocene's appeal is not clarity but its opposite. Like globalization in the 1990s, it has come to mean all things to all people. That is sometimes bad and sometimes good. I want to focus on the Anthropocene as a way of thinking about history, about modernity's crises and limits, and as a means of bridging the Two Cultures. It would be impossible – and uncharitable – to ignore the Anthropocene's most important contribution: as a public and scholarly dialogue that has put artists, cultural critics, political economists, historians, geographers, biologists, and many others into conversation. This dialogue suggests something of the zeitgeist: the intuition that Nature/Society dualism cannot serve us in an era of accelerating climate change and mass extinction. At the same time, the responsibility of the radical is to name the system and identify how the Anthropocene is implicated in capitalist power, symbolically and materially. That the Anthropocene, at its core, is a fundamentally bourgeois concept should surprise no one. After all, it tells us that behind the current, disastrous state of world affairs is the *Anthropos*. It's a trick as old as modernity – the rich and powerful create problems for all of us, then tell us we're all to blame.

But are we? And just who, in any case, is "we"?

The answer is not so obvious. Neither abstract humanism nor abstract naturalism can suffice. Humans, and human organizations,

are obviously distinct from the environments in which they evolve; they are also products of those environments. This is why I've underscored the concept of environment-making as central to rethinking history (Moore 2015a): we make environments and the environments make us (Lewontin and Levins 1997). The web of life is obviously larger than any one species. It operates – if that is the right word – relatively independently of humans. (Just as capitalism operates relatively independently of any firm or empire or even class.) By the same measure, planetary life is a web of interdependencies, all the way up and down. Species form and differentiate through a web of life. That web of life is historical, and not only over geological time. Capitalism's revolutionary character can scarcely be understood absent the extraordinary scientific revolutions behind successive great leaps forward in labor productivity and capital accumulation. Consider how every era of capitalist development turns on agricultural revolutions that comprise not only class, production, and power, but also new agronomic and botanical knowledges (see esp. Cañizares-Esguerra 2004; Kloppenborg 1988; Brockway 1979; Perkins 1997). Capitalism revolutionizes the co-production of historical natures as no previously existing civilization could. The implication? Any historical conception of human activity and relations that abstracts geography and biospheric relations is irreducibly partial. Geography in its widest and best sense is an ontological condition.

Human specificities form through, not in spite of, the web of life. From this point of view, we may do away with a powerful dualist shibboleth. In its most naked expression (e.g. Foster 2016), the claim runs like this: seeing human organizations as a part of nature leads to an undifferentiated monism in which no human specificity – and no "natural" specificity – can be discerned. This in turn undercuts the possibility for Red-Green politics.

Nothing could be farther from the truth! Seeing human organizations as part of nature leads us to explore manifold socio-ecological connections that make us specifically human – just not "exceptional." These are connections of agro-ecology, of disease, of climate, of hydrology, of the micro-biome, of non-human animals. Can we really discern what makes us human, for instance, abstracted from our relations with dogs, pigs, fish, and cows? For that matter, is there any reasonable way to think through capitalism abstracted from its relations with non-human animals (e.g. Weis 2013; Hribal 2003; Wilde 2000)? At stake is *how* we understand capitalism in the web of life – which in turn shapes emancipatory strategies. Philosophy will of course not solve the problem of capitalism's unfolding crisis and the contemporary, horrific, dangers to life. But it will be hard to develop a politics of emancipation for all life without a philosophical commitment to precisely that: emancipating *all* life. And an authentically multi-species politics of emancipation will require – and will need to nurture – ways of thinking that connect first, and separate later.

Green Thought has always pointed beyond the dualism of Nature and Society (e.g. Harvey 1974; Naess 1973; Williams 1972; Merchant 1980; Haraway 1991; Plumwood 1993). Just as often, it has been captive to the binary it challenges. Green Thought has been vexed by a thorny reality that has never fit comfortably within dualist models. To their credit, environmentally-oriented scholars have stayed with the trouble, to paraphrase Haraway (2016). That reality is one in which humans, quite obviously, work and live and play through our relations with bodies (some human, many not) and landscapes, themselves often made by bodies. There is no "separation" from nature in our lived experience, even if the natures we inhabit are often filled with concrete structures, traffic jams, and cell phone towers.

Biographical sketch

Jason W. Moore, a world historian and historical geographer, is associate professor of Sociology at Binghamton University. He is author of several books, mostly recently *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Verso, 2015), *Ecologia-mondo e crisi del capitalismo: La fine della natura a buon mercato* (Ombre Corte, 2015), and editor of *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM Press, 2016). He coordinates the World-Ecology Research Network, and is presently completing *Seven Cheap Things: A World-Ecological Manifesto* (with Raj Patel) and *Ecology of the Rise of Capitalism*, both for the University of California Press. This essay is drawn from "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Origins of Our Ecological Crisis."

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